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Sources

Studying the work, habits, and style of historical artists can aid contemporary artists in their ongoing search for technical skill, inspiration, communicative ability, and meaning. In this sense, I connect with a wide variety of historical artists and their work.

Visually and through intent, the work of 20<sup>th</sup> century photographer Dorothy Norman is very much like my work. Dorothy Norman met renowned 20<sup>th</sup> century photographer and founder of the gallery 291 Alfred Stieglitz in New York City in 1927. She came under his artistic, cultural, and theoretical tutelage and began photographing. She also grew quite close to Stieglitz and became his personal assistant. Stieglitz encouraged Norman to push her photographs beyond the mundane and the material; Stieglitz himself believed in the power of photography to penetrate “the veneer of the infinite”<sup>1</sup> and to reveal the mysteries of the universe. Norman followed Stieglitz advice but took a more personal approach to the task. Norman’s photographs document her personal sense of the sacred in everyday life. I, too, photograph *my* personal sense of the sacred. Norman photographed creative people, places she called home, and the natural world around her. I find similar subject matter deserving of attention, contemplation, and reverence. Her photographs are crisp and detailed; they are consumable; the eye delights in looking at them and the resulting sensations have characteristics of touch. The sensation of touch derived from sight is something I make every effort to achieve in my work. For Norman the function of art was “putting mankind in touch with the infinite.”<sup>2</sup> For me the function of art is putting humankind back in touch with mankind and with the world around us, thus reconnecting oneself to the infinite.

Norman’s photographs feel private, quiet, and intimate. As in my work, Norman used the frame to crop her subject matter, allowing for a small, close up view that narrows our focus. Edward Abrahams described Norman’s works as “modest statements that reward careful consideration.” Similarly, I aim for my work to engage the viewer with a careful and deliberate way of looking. Norman photographed the composer Edgar Varese and said “his face was a constant source of wonder to me.”<sup>3</sup> This sense of wonder and engaged looking is what I strive for in my work.

Another early 20<sup>th</sup> century photographer to whom I relate is Doris Ulmann. Ulmann’s work documents African American folk life in the rural south of the United States. As the country was becoming more focused on the urban, Ulmann’s work revered the rural and served as a call back to nature and the sometimes overlooked and seemingly simple aspects of life. Over a century later my work voices a similar call. However, my work relates most to Ulmann’s through visual and formal qualities. Ulmann’s portraits focus on singular subjects revealing myriad detail and eliminating most of the context through short depth of field and relatively tight cropping. Ulmann’s landscapes and still lives are also compelling to me because of her careful attention to capturing detail and her use of the frame to direct the focus of the viewer.

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<sup>1</sup> Barth, Miles, ed. Intimate Visions: The Photographs of Dorothy Norman Chronicle Books, California 1993

<sup>2</sup> *ibid*

<sup>3</sup> *ibid*

“Green Still Life” is a work by Paul Cadmus in casein, crayon, and pencil. It shows a piece of birch bark, a leaf, and two acorns on a simple, flat, green background. It is visually arresting, captivating, and life-like. In me it causes a sense of wonder, a fascination, and the desire to look, to see deeply and well not only at the work but at the world around me. It is this success that Cadmus achieved that I strive for in my work.

Favoring the work of painters such as Cadmus has been a consistent theme in my search for meaning and connection to art history. In addition to Cadmus, I also have a fascination with the work of the American colonial painter John Singleton Copley. Copley was a distinguished, talented, and well-known portraitist in Boston whose works helped many colonists to make or grasp a position for themselves in the newly competitive social and political ranks. My initial fascination with Copley’s work began with his system of creating portraits that were at once both accurate physical portrayals of his subjects and also portraits that were highly embellished with objects and symbolism often deliberately fabricated by Copley in order to boost the apparent social and political standing of the subject matter. Another aspect of Copley’s work that I am drawn to is his strict attention to detail and his treatment of surfaces and their textures. The success and extent to which he pursues realism in his work produces an almost photographic effect. It is this realism and his attention to texture that I am ultimately drawn to in Copley’s work.

Richard Avedon’s photographs may be the biggest source of artistic inspiration that I derive from art history. Avedon’s portraits are unmistakable. They are typically frontal views of people, either full body or head, often black and white, shot against a plain background. The result is jarring with every stitch, hair, and pore on display for the viewer. This push of detail against such a plain background invites the viewer to study another person with an intensity that could not be experienced in real life. These portraits inspired me to create similar works which focus solely on the subject and aim to reveal as much as possible through the stillness of the photograph which forces us to see and notice things we often miss in the natural motion of our lives. In spite of my intense admiration and emulation of qualities of Avedon’s work my intent veers from his in choice of subject matter. Avedon photographed celebrities, strangers, politicians, and artists. Avedon photographed an almost infinite amount of people most of whom he barely knew, while I choose only to photograph people close to me, both physically and emotionally. I need to feel comfortable with my subject in order to create a certain level of intimacy, a high level of detail and resolution, and an unconventional way of looking at the subject matter.

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Looking at the work of contemporary artists has helped me to refine my visual language and assess what messages my work sends in today’s world. It has also helped me to clarify aspects of my artistic intent for the public, and myself.

Avigdor Arikha is a contemporary painter whose artistic intent nearly matches my own. Arikha survived Nazi concentration camps in Ukraine during World War II. His ability to artistically document his surroundings helped him to survive when Red Cross nurses noticed his talent and helped him to rescue. These early experiences in Arikha’s life gave him appreciation of and a grave and serious respect for that which the world presents us. This caused in him an esthetic impulse toward the documentation of life as accurately as he could see and record it. I am driven by a similar esthetic impulse however I removed the filter of my own hand by choosing photography over painting. I

aim for accuracy so acute that painting would not suffice. I am focused on a re-engagement with visual acuity and deliberate seeing. In the same vein, Arikha has been called a “crusader for the lost rights of the eye.”<sup>4</sup> His work features everyday objects in a still life set, often void of context. His portraits often depict either himself or his wife, people he comes into contact with everyday. I too make work that deals with that which we see everyday. I make photographs of life stilled so that we may engage and see more fully and deliberately and thus invigorate the mind and senses. His work is concerned with “the losses of modern life” and is “engaged in a struggle to retain what is being overlooked.”<sup>5</sup> My desire to create the kind of work I do stems partly from my concern with the effects of technology on modern life. Technology and its many useful applications in our world cause the speed of life to increase drastically. Thus we are rushed past many of our chances to deliberately engage our senses with the world and people around us. After painting abstractly for much of his career Arikha returned to painting strictly from life, with the object or person in front of him because he strives for the intensity of the freshly seen or felt. I strive for the blurring of boundaries between sight and touch. I want viewers to be able to “touch” the images with their eyes and not only imagine the actual texture but let that texture caress their eyes. He believes that we have an obligation to see the world with concerned intensity. “There is nothing more necessary for the conscience as well as for the eye than the responsibility to see, deeply and well, what is before our eyes.”<sup>6</sup>

Similar to Neil Winokur I am creating studio portraits and intimate stills that take everyday things out of context in order to reveal and place importance on every physical detail. Winokur does not want to make his work look glamorous or soft and said that he would “rather take things the way they are.” Similarly, the aim for my life stills is for them to be as true to life as possible, not glamorous or pompously beautiful, but quiet and natural. Like my work in Winokur’s work there are images of objects with his portrait images. Winokur believes that photographing things and objects doesn’t have to be about consumerism or even about the thing itself. However, Winokur’s objects are related to his portraits; they reveal more information about the person in the portrait. The objects, or life stills, that I create are only related to my portraits conceptually.

I am very attracted to the Minimalist qualities in the work of Uta Barth. For me, Minimalism is art that doesn’t allow the viewer to hold all of the information in a particular situation and pushes this aspect to the forefront in order to achieve any number of goals. When asked about the confusion caused by minimalism in her work in an interview with Sheryl Conkelton, Barth replied “this kind of questioning and reorientation is the point of entry and discovery, not only in a cognitive way, but in a most visceral, physical and personal sense. Everything is pointing to one’s own activity of looking, to an awareness and sort of hyper-consciousness of visual perception. The only way I know how to invite this experience is by removing the other things (i.e., subject matter) for you to think about.” Barth’s work is indeed minimal **and** confusing. Her photographs often picture a singular object in focus while the rest of the picture plane falls out of focus, disorienting the viewer. At the same time the lack of hard focus throughout much of the image allows the focus Barth provides us to radiate, catch our

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<sup>4</sup> Stevens, Mark. “The Rights of the Eye”, The New Republic. July 13 & 20 1992

<sup>5</sup> ibid

<sup>6</sup> ibid

attention and grasp us. Other images such as *Ground #52*, which pictures the top half of a black leather couch against a plain white wall, have very little subject matter in them to start with. The plain white wall allows the viewer to focus in on the couch, the interesting shadows and highlights created, and the perceivable texture of the leather. Had the wall been decorated or had the whole couch been shown our attention may have strayed elsewhere. The techniques of limiting information that Barth employs are ones that I use in my work as well. An additional aspect of Barth's work that I relate to is her choice to photograph her immediate surroundings. I photograph my immediate surroundings as well because I don't think that we need to travel great distances, any distance at all, to be dazzled and intrigued by our visual surroundings.

Elinor Carucci's many bodies of work have been a source of inspiration to me throughout my creative journey. Her work with portraiture and the female body in a sensual, intimate, but not sexual style resonated with me when I was working in similar subject matter in late 2006. Carucci's series *Closer* is one of her most compelling bodies of work, and my favorite of her series. The title of the series, *Closer*, is something I connect with primarily. Getting close, or closer, to my subject matter is an overarching theme in most of my work. For the series Carucci photographed her family during day-to-day life. However, the portraits are intimate, sensual, close, and quiet, not qualities typical of day-to-day life. Carucci occludes a good deal of atmospheric information and uses unconventional framing and angles to achieve this quality. I work similarly in order to create images that are quiet and sensuous. Carucci uses these techniques in her commercial work while photographing not only people but objects as well. I am particularly drawn to this work and the straightforward yet captivating presence the images take on.

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In his book *Listening to the Land* Derrick Jensen poses these questions: "What is the relationship between technological innovation and human misery? How can we, as a culture and as individuals, rediscover our connections to ourselves, to our neighbors, to the rest of the natural world?" The art I create is an attempt to answer and pose a solution to these questions.

I think that we, as a modern people, a culture technologically advanced and dependent, have lost touch with our senses and our surroundings. We no longer look to a tree, ankle or pebble in awe. Cloud formations and the face of a friend no longer intrigue us, hold our attention, or cause us to stop and think. John Stilgoe has similar concerns. In his book *Outside Lies Magic* Stilgoe implores us to go outside and explore, to shed "the trap of the programmed electronic age so gently closing around so many people." I believe that this is part of the answer to Jensen's questions. If we go outside, explore, and re-engage with our world we will replace our misery with fascination and fulfillment. I believe that a good deal of the misery that modern people feel stems from boredom and feelings of low self worth. This seems contradictory to say because we live at a fast pace with images, noises, and information zooming around us and with the help of technology we are getting more accomplished, faster than ever. However, most of that activity and stimulation is not actually engaged with the physical world around us. We no longer

learn information by going outside and looking at the sky, touching a plant, or observing wear and tear on architecture. We learn the information we want from books or the Internet. This engages the mind and senses, but not fully, not enough. Over and over in his guide to exploring the landscape Stilgoe urges us to get outside and “flex the mind, a little at first, then a lot. Savor something special. Enjoy the best-kept secret around—the ordinary, everyday landscape that rewards any explorer, that touches any explorer with magic.” Until the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the study of chromatics and visual acuity informed men and women about how lights and color affect the eye. Stilgoe credits the advent of newspapers, inexpensively made photographs, cinema and advanced physics in the decline of interest and education in visual acuity. He states that the study of chromatics has virtually disappeared in today’s culture. In fact, current research shows that only a few books (in the St. Mary’s College of Maryland library, only one) even mention chromatics. The most commonly found book on the subject, *Modern Chromatics*, was published in 1897. Stilgoe states, “as education in visual acuity diminished... seeing became less and less rewarding. Today explorers must teach themselves the lessons of visual acuity... and they can only learn by looking hard.” And so I create photographs that frame and still life and the world around me so that I can look, and see, and learn. My hope is that when others see the photographs, see the world that usually zooms past them they stop and look; they see what they have been missing and turn around from the photograph on the wall and look at their own world, connect with their own world, admire their own world, learn from their own world.

In Zen Buddhism there is a concept called “interbeing” which proposes that all things are the same; there is no division because all things are connected. In his book *The Heart of Understanding* Thich Nhat Hanh gives the example that there is a cloud in a piece of paper because a cloud produces rain which nourishes trees that make paper. If we follow this line of reason, everything can be connected. Thus, I am the trees, the road, a classmate, an apple, everything, just as every person and thing is every other thing. Similarly, Thich Nhat Hanh explains that you cannot have one thing without the other, or opposite. For instance, if there were no evil, good could not exist. Therefore, we must see that the world of things and people outside of the self is not separate but **is** the self, which could not exist without the presence of the outside people and things.

The idea that everything “inter-is” inspires much of my work. When I look around at the people and things around me I feel connected to each and every thing. I respect things more because I am able to see that how I treat one thing will definitely affect all other things. “Interbeing” also helps me to engage more fully with the world around me because it causes me to think about the one-ness of all things as I see each and everything. It allows me to focus in on something but still connect it to the wider world and my self. This focusing in and connecting is what I believe to be true seeing.

A long time ago what people could see on the earth was much different than what we can see now. The first groups of people on earth could see other people and the objects made by their hands, animals, the earth and the plant life that covered it. As humans progressed civilization arose. Organized religion, government, and early technological advances brought new things for us to see: houses, wheels, weapons, and cloth. The presence, variation, and amount of visual stimuli have increased consistently and rapidly throughout human history. Now, after the advent of reproducible

photography, television, magazines, computers, and Internet the catalogue of things to see has become overwhelming. We cannot see everything. It is hard to choose what to see, what to connect with. At times we must choose not to look. The pace at which we live swiftly carries us by so many things we should or could or would benefit from seeing. But we must look, we must engage with the world around us. In order to do so, we must choose what to look at. We must occlude much from our perception. We must focus in on something, anything, and connect, see deeply and well, and allow the sensations produced to course through our modern bodies, to invigorate the mind, to probe curiosity.

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